

Crowded Austin Animal Shelter has Turned Away Some Healthy Dogs, Cats

By Ben Wear, American-Statesman Staff | July 21, 2016

Highlights

- Officials say that the spring's rains, in particular, filled up the East Austin facility.
- The shelter has periodically limited admissions in recent months to dogs and cats with health problems.
- A critic tells the Statesman that the center has done cursory screening, turning away animals needing aide.

The [Austin Animal Center](#), buffeted by an uptick in incoming dogs and cats displaced by this spring's flooding, have had a full house most of the time since March and periodically has had to turn away healthy cats and larger dogs.

That "managed intake" policy has sparked some criticism in the animal activist community. But officials at the five-year municipal shelter in East Austin say the barbs are unfounded, that even with those controls the facility has always accepted 40 to 60 animals a day. And they say, much like a period [during the 2015 flooding](#), there really is no room at the inn.

"We have been at capacity," said Tawny Hammond, the city's chief animal service officer. "But at no time have we been closed, at no time did we turn emergencies away. Our doors were never closed to pets in harm's way."

So far this year, the shelter has taken in 500 more animals than it has been able to move through the facility, either through adoption, transfer to private rescue operations, returns to owners or, a small percentage of time, through euthanasia.

Occasionally the shelter has posted signs announcing it is not currently accepting "healthy cats and kittens" or "healthy medium-large dogs," which generally means dogs over 35 pounds.



Rodolfo Gonzalez

Donner and Blitz, siblings that have been up for adoption for more than 30 days, share a kennel at the Austin Animal Center. The crowded shelter has been struggling to find enough space for animals, especially with the surge of lost pets that came in after the flooding this spring.

None of those signs were up Thursday, but inside the shelter, five larger dogs were housed in a conference room, their metal cages shrouded in sheets to help keep the occupants calm. Another big dog, a pit bull mix, was living for a time in a case out back in an open air truck port. In the facility's five dorms for larger dogs, which have indoor rooms connected to outdoor runs by a doggie door, each domicile had at least one dog in it. Some had two.

Jennifer Lucas, a Reagan High School English teacher who regularly fosters dogs and cats, said the animal center's managed intake procedures have been poorly run. She cited several instances of pregnant cats or animals with other health needs being turned away after cursory examination by volunteers in tents set up outside the center.

“This has been a problem for the last six months,” Lucas said. “They might have a genuine space problem, but closing input to the public is a very short-sighted approach. Regardless of whether an animal appears healthy or not, you at least have to have it looked over by a vet.”

The Levander Loop center had 485 animals Thursday: 280 dogs and 205 cats, according to shelter reports. Another 58 dogs were temporarily living at the Town Lake Animal Center, 487 were in foster care and eight were at veterinarians’ offices outside the shelters. The main shelter on Wednesday, according to the report, had taken in 30 dogs and cats.

The report listed “outcomes” for 36 animals on Wednesday, including 15 adoptions, nine transfers to other facilities, eight returns to owners and one euthanized animal. The facility, according to its 2014-15 annual report, has stayed comfortably above [the city’s “no-kill” goal](#) of euthanizing no more than 10 percent of the animals that pass through. Of the 17,473 dogs and cats admitted in the year ending Sept. 30, 2015, 1,001 (or just under 6 percent) were put down.

Hammond said help is on the way in the form of a \$5 million expansion of the Levander Loop center. She said that up to 60 larger dog kennels will be added, along with other holding and exercise facilities, parking and improvements in streets and sidewalks around the facility. That project should begin by November, she said, and take about a year to complete.

In the meantime, Kristen Auerbach, Hammond’s deputy, said the center has worked in various ways to stem the tide of dogs and cats, including nearly constant adoption promotions.

“We’re asking for help from the community,” Auerbach said, suggesting that people who pick up a stray dog or cat hold onto a day or two if possible and seek out the owner before bringing the animal to Levander Loop. “We’re in a critical situation. We’re asking, please give us time.”

<http://www.mystatesman.com/news/news/local/crowded-austin-animal-shelter-has-turned-away-some/nr3ZS/>